

Comment

Heaven in Ordinary

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Wallace Stevens

A parish priest was telling me recently that his last parish census had disclosed that 40% of the people who came to his church were drawn from outside the parish boundaries. Long-standing loyalty to place, the attractions of the liturgy and pastoral style of the incumbent obviously counted for something, but the most powerful factor influencing these faithful exiles was the arrangement of the bus routes. It is a salutary reminder of the involvement of the Church with the World to discover that London Transport might have as much influence on the pastoral strategy of the inner-city as the Archbishop and his presbyterate.

There can be no doubt that parochial life in certain areas of the Catholic Church is under severe stress. In the past the most successful parochial communities belonged to those areas which enjoyed a fairly strong secular unity. The labour and sacrifice expended on the construction of the parish community, often fuelled by a sense of common oppression stemming from social, racial or religious discrimination augmented by economic hardship, were seen as investments for the future. The pattern of interpretation of this activity was a kind of evolutionary eschatology. The Catholic community seemed set fair for expansion and since the enterprise was of God it could not be resisted. This model of ecclesial life no longer conforms to the experience of most parishes. The solidarity of many of these communities has been fractured by decline and redevelopment in the towns and shifting population trends in the country.

The strong identification with the local parish church and its clergy is no longer such a prominent feature of social and religious experience. Parochial clergy still find themselves called upon to solemnise the key moments of human life: birth, marriage and death, but they are not always sure of celebrating these events with individuals who share

recognisably the same faith or even live within the bounds of the parish. In a consumerist society dominated by free-market forces parishes can find themselves in unwitting competition with each other, with people travelling from one to the other attracted by the range of services offered. One of the reasons for the current uncertainty about the value of the traditional parish structures is the appreciation of the parish primarily in institutional terms. In this perspective the parish priest becomes less the evangelist, the teacher and man of worship, and more the president of a religious corporation with supervisory functions over various educational and spiritual activities and programmes; a professional amongst professionals. Christianity, as Henri de Lubac wrote, is a religion of the word 'not of a word written and mute, but of a Word living and incarnate'. The parish is the word taking shape in a particular set of historical circumstances. It is the creative word spoken in the Spirit through which the living God touches his people and marks them out as consecrated to himself. The parochial community is a commitment in hope to the world, not a retreat from the world.

What constitutes the parish as a theological rather than a simply geographical or juridical reality is its apostolic nature, it proceeds from the bishop, from the wider ambiance of the particular Church, to a defined area of that mission field. The Church's apostolic mission does not involve the colonisation of a particular area and its domination by a particular culture; clearly a parish must be rooted in its territory but without being absorbed by it. The Redeeming word spoken through the communion of the parish and following the pattern of the incarnation, takes on the flesh and bones of that district in terms of the human disorder, aspirations, desires and disappointments of those who live there, but it takes them on to transform them. The area tells its story in the life of the parish and the meaning of that story is Jesus. The parish itself becomes an image of transformation, it breaks the area open, frees it from the confinement of particularity and locates it in the wider apostolic community that transcends time and place. The parish is not a refuge but a centre of mission.

AJW